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ABSTRACT

When students have difficulty writing, it is often because they are apathetic or afraid of failing, rather than because of a serious lack of skill. Basic writing teachers must break through student apathy and fear before the students can begin to progress. One way is to ask basic writers to unscramble sentences or analyze ambiguous sentences to discover that they already have a strong command of grammar and structure. Basic writers also often have poor self esteem which can interfere with their ability to produce work comparable with their capabilities. A student-centered environment in the classroom, and use of concrete materials and problems can help students build a sense of self-worth. Small group work and the use of tapes, films, and records can help maintain student interest, while occasional "frivolous" freewriting or analyzing can break class monotony. Because basic writers usually have numerous problems with their writing, setting one or two tangible goals for each paper can reduce student anxiety about producing a "perfect" paper, and numerous drafts can let them achieve one goal at a time. This strategy reduces the amount of time teachers must spend grading as well. Such methods may help students come to regard writing as a conquerable skill, and provide them with the impetus for further self-directed learning. (JC)

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Basic Writing: Breaking through the Barriers of Apathy and Fear

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Anyone who has taught native-speaking basic writers knows the ambivalent feelings a teacher experiences at the beginning of the course. We may be exhilarated by the challenge, but we are also apprehensive of our success in reaching all the students and distressed at how quickly some of them tune us out--no matter how lively our presentations are. What do we do, then, with students who do not respond, who are afraid to try, or who seem to actively resist learning? We must find ways of changing their attitudes about writing and about themselves as writers: we must convince them of their competency in language, defuse their anxiety, and assure them that success is possible.

We all know the maxim "It's impossible to teach someone who doesn't want to learn." It's also very difficult to teach anyone who is fearful. Perhaps because writing involves so much self-revelation, students hide their fear behind surface apathy or avoidance behaviors. Some feign disinterest, sleep through class or miss class when a paper is assigned. Others become so anxious that they are unable to write a clear sentence or that they become ill. However, despite the apparent resistance of these students, most want to learn. They have simply created one or more self-defense mechanisms against failure. Consequently, one of the first things we must do is prove to our students that they already possess an amazing competency in their language.

At the beginning of a basic writing course, we should emphasize what students already know, instead of carping on their errors. Any number of exercises and activities can be developed to achieve this goal. Jacobs and Rosenbaum pinpoint four basic kinds of language knowledge that native speakers possess: the ability to distinguish grammatical and non-grammatical strings, the comprehension of lexically incomplete strings, the recognition of lexical and syntactic ambiguity, and the recognition of lexical and syntactic synonymy. Students are very impressed when they are made aware of these proficiencies.

On the first day of class, I often ask students to analyze simple sentences with scrambled word order or grammatically correct, but nonsensical, sentences to prove to them that they have a strong grasp of grammatical structure in the language. Next we examine lexically similar, but structurally different sentences to explore how we know that these word groups mean the same thing. Having shown them that they do know a great deal about their own language, I next persuade them that their difficulties with the writtten language are not due to their shortcomings as much as to the difficulty of the language itself--its ambiguity, illogical structures, and unfamiliar conventions.

Students have fun examining sentences like "The lamb was too hot to eat" and "Visiting relatives can be a nuisance,"

pondering why the plural of mouse is mice whereas the plural of house is not hice," or discovering why although" requires a comma when it introduces a clause, but however requires a semicolon. Subsequently, students can change the diction of a written passage from "street language" to formal or vice versa. Activities such as this provide a good introduction to the differences in convention between written and oral language. Whatever activities are chosen, we must convince our students that they are not as inadequate to the task of writing as they fear.

Building self-confidence is one important part of changing student attitudes, but we must also alleviate their anxieties by providing a comfortable, non-threatening atmosphere which encourages participation from every class member. Proceeding from the assumption that the "teacher-centered" approach has not worked for these students in the past, we should convert to a "student-centered" classroom, such as the environmental mode advocated by George Hillocks, which emphasizes student interaction and the use of concrete materials and problems (122-28).

From the very beginning of the course, the teacher's position in the classroom is important. Instead of speaking from a podium or central desk, walking about the room and talking directly to individual students is a more effective and

relaxed way of holding the students' interest. We can initiate a classroom discussion by asking a direct question in a conversational tone to an individual student and then asking another student if he or she agrees or disagrees with the first student's comments. This method encourages the involvement of students who are reluctant to speak out in front of the entire class. In every case of class discussion, we should listen with attention and respect to what students say and encourage divergent responses--explaining that wrong answers are often necessary steps in finding a correct answer.

Lecturing about writing or grammar will lose most students, because most basic writers don't deal well with abstracts. Students need opportunities to work directly with the skills introduced. They need concrete demonstration, rather than words, and projects, rather than lecture. They respond more positively to the use of overheads, films, tapes, and small group work. The early placement of students into support groups of about five to seven members provides the safety of a group, the socialization that many basic students require for effective learning, and the opportunity for individualization of instruction that many require.

Instructors must be alert to effective group composition, however. Groups need direction initially, and frequently teachers are unaware of frictions or passive resistance within

groups. Extroverted students can dominate group activities, and highly anxious students may refuse to contribute or contribute only irrelevancies. Some experimentation and observation is necessary within any individual class to ascertain if the group work is effective or if group compositions need to be changed according to the activity being explored. Different groupings may be most effective for brainstorming, analyzing or editing. Yet, despite the need for careful monitoring, teachers should beware of too much interference. Many basic students, having been passive learners in the past, are conditioned to consider the teacher as the ultimate authority and are more than willing to let the instructor make all the important decisions.

In addition to benefitting from a student-centered approach which involves them actively in the curriculum, students will also be more comfortable with the task of writing if we can make it pleasurable. A few minutes spent sharing anecdotes about predicaments, freewriting about frivolous topics, like their toes, the creation of sniglets, or the discussion of unusual word origins can provide relief from the stress of more formal assignments and make the important point that some aspects of writing can be fun. Students do, of course, have to learn how to write academic papers, but many of the necessary strategies can be developed in other contexts first. For example, basic students often have the most

difficulty objectifying their topics. They respond best to emotional topics and are frequently unfamiliar with the level of abstraction expected in most academic writing. We can let them begin a piece of writing in a mode which is comfortable and meaningful to them and then use group discussion and redirection to help them refine their ideas and alter their approach to fulfill the assigned objectives. It is particularly important for basic writers that not every assignment be graded. They need some risk-free opportunities to experiment with new structures and forms.

Whatever assignment we decide upon, we should approach it from several differrent angles to generate enough ideas that each student can find a niche. We might use comic strips, editorials, videotapes of 60 Minutes or another television show, records, or oral discussion to generate ideas. We need to represent divergent viewpoints and topics which are open-ended enough for each individual to be able to respond according to his or her level of perception, skill, and concern. Peer editing and instructor feedback can help students shape their ideas into one or more formats. In addition to the traditional academic essay, they can write an article for the school newspaper, a letter to the editor, a proposal to the school administration, an explantion of a process for another course or for new employees at their workplace. Whatever the context or

format, we need to provide opportunities for our students to learn to think critically, to experiment actively, and to apply their new skills in meeting the demands of the academic community and the workplace.

Even in the more formal graded assignments, we can assure success by establishing specific goals for selected tasks--goals that both we and our students understand clearly. But first, we must have a good analysis of each student's current skill level and preferred learning style, and we must pinpoint our expectations.

Skill levels and learning styles can be determined through brief, informal conferences, profiles--such as those provided by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or the Daly-Miller Anxiety Scale, and two to three diagnostic papers given in the first class periods. Teachers interested in using student profiles can find an excellent discussion the MBTI in People Types and Tiger Stripes and of the Daly-Miller Scale in RTE. Information gained from these instruments, plus personal contact with students, can aid teachers in interpreting the apparent strengths and weaknesses of students' writing skills and in designing individual objectives.

As teachers, we should examine our goals and expectations closely before making an assignment. We need to go beyond vague expectations to develop very concrete ones in relation to the

skills we plan to teach. We should establish specific organizational, rhetorical, and grammar control goals for each paper. For example, once we have defined what components we expect a definition paragraph to have, we can hand out sample paragraphs and allow the students time to develop inductively, in small groups or in the class as a whole, a skeletal model by which they can measure their own paragraphs. Similarly, we should establish specific grammar control goals for each paper. If we are teaching the complex sentence within the context of the definition paper, then we need to predetermine what level of sophistication and control we expect our students to achieve and be alert to the needs of individual students in meeting the assigned goal. We can hand out a sheet of model sentences, developed collaboratively by the students or drawn from previous students' work, and ask students to incorporate a certain number of similar constructions during the revision stage of their papers. Focusing on specific goals allows students to respond to manageable objectives and gives them a feeling of accomplishment upon their completion.

Persuading students to break the writing process down into segments is difficult, but doing so can give them a feeling of success at each level. I generally assign interesting content as the goal of the first draft, development, organization and

general clarity as the goal of the second, and control of sentence structure, grammar, and manuscript form as the objective of the following draft(s). The number of drafts for any stage may vary according to the success of individual students in completing each step successfully. Multi-drafting may allow fewer papers, particularly for students with very weak skills, but it provides more depth and individualization of instruction. Students aren't overwhelmed by simultaneous consideration of all the demands of writing. Instead they can focus on specific aspects and receive direct guidance in completing each task successfully. For example, if a few students are having particular difficulties with sentence limits, they can postpone worrying about that area until the third draft, thereby prohibiting this anxiety from interfering with the basic development and clarification of their ideas. I can then arrange for peer help or offer individual conferences explaining why fragments or fused sentences are a problem in each paper, provide similar structures for each student to work with, and direct each student to apply this new knowledge to his or her own paper. Since the students, rather than the teacher, do the correcting, they then have the satisfaction of having conquered one problem of writing successfully, and this success is the impetus to tackle the next step.

Although this method may sound like a lot of work for the

instructor, only a minute or two need to be spent with each student. Focusing on one specific aspect of a paper is easier for the teacher too. Gone are the hours spent studying finished, but garbled, papers, pondering what the student is trying to say so that I can help. In fact, I find that I do very little grading out of class. I do take final drafts home occasionally, but I am so familiar with the papers and with what the each student's objectives are that I can respond to the papers very quickly.

Progress may be slow for some students, and teachers may have to ignore a host of other problems which haven't been covered yet; but, if at all possible, basic students should get the reward of finishing an assignment successfully before moving on to something new. The goal is to allow a lot of latitude for improvement, to put grammar in its place as a tool, and to give students the opportunity for success. Part of students' willingness to rework a paper depends upon their belief that they <u>can</u> improve their work. Carefully sequenced assignments with clear objectives reinforce this belief, and the instructor's concern about each phase of their work helps them view the work as meaningful and relevant to their educational goals.

If we can change our students' attitudes about themselves as writers by making the writing experience a positive,

pleasurable one, then we will have provided them with the impetus for further self-directed learning.

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